

Kosher Wine Compromise

BY Marc Shapiro

Baltimore Jewish Council, alcohol lobby and distributors work out way to increase variety of kosher wines available to Maryland residents

Maryland residents looking for a wider variety of kosher wines should have more options by 2015.

A compromise reached between the Baltimore Jewish Council, the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA), Licensed Beverage Distributors of Maryland, Inc., and the state comptroller's office will create an online list of wines available, increase the number of wines available in Maryland to 1,000 by 2015 and educate retailers on how to make special orders.

"It is my sincere hope that this resolves the difficulty so many Marylanders have had to obtain quality kosher wine," wrote Delegate Sam Arora (D-District 19) in a letter to Delegate Dereck Davis (D-District 25), chairman of the House Economic Matters Committee, withdrawing legislation known as HB 830 in light of the compromise.

While a 2011 direct-to-home wine shipping bill in Maryland opened up consumers' ability to order from wineries in the United States, most kosher wines are made overseas.

"The problem for observant Jews is there are only about six kosher wineries in the United States," explained Cailey Locklair, BJC's director of government relations and public policy.

The lack of kosher wine options stemmed from several factors. Although the U.S. imports thousands of wines every year, only about 4 percent wind up in Maryland, said Locklair. *The Beverage Journal*, the "alcohol Bible" for retailers, she said, only had 14 wines listed in its kosher section, although the BJC found 253 kosher wines in the journal after combing through it.

In areas with small Jewish populations, stores wouldn't stock kosher wine, and placing a special order sometimes meant ordering an entire case rather than one bottle.

"They have to go out of their way to do this," Locklair said of those retailers. "I think it was easier for them to say, 'No, I'm really sorry. I can't help you.'"

Under the compromise, as outlined in Arora's letter, the comptroller has created an online listing of all the kosher wines available in Maryland and the distributors who sell them. Distributors will regularly submit lists of the kosher wines they sell semiannually to the comptroller, and the MSBLA will educate retailers and consumers on how to special order wines not listed in *The Beverage Journal*. The journal will also be updated to reflect available kosher wines.

A goal of the compromise is to increase the number of available kosher wines in Maryland to 1,000 by 2015. The BJC is helping distributors determine what wines to carry and has already added 71 new wines. As more



Diana Coyle and Michael Fishman stand with some kosher wines at newly opened Canton Crossing Wine & Spirits. (Marc Shapiro)

wines become available, distributors will update the comptroller's kosher list, the letter said.

Retailers will also be able to order consumers single bottles of kosher wine, said Locklair. Special orders may require working with out-of-state distributors or importers.

"It seems really straightforward that you should be able to walk up to the counter and say, 'Hey, I want to order one bottle of wine,'" said Locklair.

Antonio Busalacchi, wine consultant, climate scientist and director of the Earth System Science Interdisciplinary Center at the University of Maryland, said international sales of kosher wines are up 12 percent this year compared with 2013.

"Kosher wine is no longer your old grandfather's Manischewitz," said Busalacchi. "The quality is on par with other wine regions around the world."

He said non-Jewish populations are interested in wine from the Middle East, and kosher wine goes through high-quality processing that is required by the laws of kashrut.

At Quarry Wine and Spirits, wine consultant Michael Fishman stocked his Quarry Lake store with more than 100 varieties of kosher wine. His wife, Diana Coyle, who co-owns the store with a business partner, just opened Canton Crossing Wine & Spirits downtown.

Although the Canton store will be focused more on beer because of the area's younger demographics, the 12 varieties of kosher wine it carries will be displayed among the non-kosher wines.

"The wines that we're carrying are of great quality; they're every bit as good as the wines they're sitting next to," said Fishman. "We want people who maybe wouldn't go into a kosher section to have the opportunity to taste the wines and try them. We don't want to pigeonhole them."

At the Canton store's opening on April 8, there was a small section of kosher for Passover wines, which included wine from Yarden, a subsidiary of the Golan Heights Winery, Galil Mountain Winery, Ella Valley Vineyards and Ein Karem — all Israeli wineries, alongside Manischewitz.

Fishman said he's seen the selection of kosher wine increase in recent years with more retailers and distributors carrying it.

"I think the supply chain has increased," he said. "I think that we've come a long way."

Locklair is already seeing progress.

"At least in Anne Arundel County, the liquor stores I've been in have signs that say, 'Ask us about ordering kosher wine,'" she said.

The comptroller's kosher wine list is available at

taxes.marylandtaxes.com/Business_Taxes/Business_Tax_Types/Alcohol_Tax/Reports_and_Statistics.